

SAGE GROUSE TRANSLOCATION FROM MONTANA TO ALBERTA ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 6, Glasgow
January 21, 2011**

Background

On December 14, 2010 Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) distributed an Environmental Assessment (EA) on a proposed action for a translocation of 40 sage grouse from MFWP Administrative Region 6 to the Province of Alberta Canada. The Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission (the Commission) at the August 5, 2010 Commission Meeting in Helena endorsed MFWP moving forward with the EA process and if warranted through the process, return to the Commission with a final recommendation for approval of this action.

Description of the Proposed Action

MFWP, in coordination with Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (ASRD), propose a translocation of sage grouse from within MFWP Administrative Region 6 in northeast Montana to suitable habitat in the southeastern portion of Alberta, Canada. Sage grouse have been declining in Alberta for many years and the population is now estimated to be less than 100 birds. Sage grouse are classified as an endangered species in Canada. This translocation is a population augmentation to maintain a resident population of sage grouse in Alberta.

Currently, Montana considers sage grouse as both a Species of Concern and an upland game bird having stable populations. Undoubtedly, high densities of sage grouse across Montana have provided a valid reason precluding listing, including the presence of at least two of North America's core breeding populations. One of these includes a strong subpopulation between the Missouri River and the Milk River.

Alternatively, sage grouse populations occurring north of the Milk River in predominantly silver sagebrush habitats remain at lower densities than those populations south of the Milk River. Many areas north of the Milk River have also experienced a reduction from historic distributions, including areas south of the Alberta and Saskatchewan boundaries. Some of these areas may still facilitate dispersal into or exchanges with Canadian populations, although it is likely that such movements have been greatly reduced. Small sub-populations in this region may be dependent on connectivity with larger core populations.

Within the South Valley and Phillip County area, six sage grouse lek complexes have been identified. The Beaver Cr. complex in Phillips County and the Larb Creek, Bentonite, and Willow Cr. complexes in Valley County are the most appropriate capture locations. Captures would occur in the spring of 2011, targeting up to 40 sage grouse for translocation. Female sage grouse will be preferred for the translocation.

Once captured, sage grouse will be placed in individual containers and taken to a central location where they will be processed. Logistics will be organized with ASRD staff and others to

transport sage grouse across the international boundary in a timely fashion. Once at release sites, sage grouse will be released near known locations of resident sage grouse leks in the best protected habitat. MFWP and ASRD will monitor and evaluate this translocation from both the perspective of the source leks and the actual birds that are released in Alberta. The costs associated with the translocation will be predominately covered by ASRD.

Physical, Biological and Human Impacts of Project

Several resource issues relevant to the proposed action to translocate 40 sage grouse were studied in detail. These include effects to the source population in South Valley and Phillips Counties, effects to sage grouse populations in silver sagebrush habitat in northern Montana and Alberta, suitability of sage grouse habitat in southeast Alberta, and effects to sage grouse monitoring and research. In all cases, the proposed action will have minor impacts to those relevant issues. Several issues were considered but were eliminated from detailed analysis because they were not significant. These non-impacted issues include those related to air, water, noise, land use, risk to human health, community impact, aesthetic/recreation and cultural/historical. While these resources are important, they were either unaffected or mildly affected by the proposed action. One exception that is able to be easily mitigated is concerning vegetation and soils. Capture methods require the use of four-wheel drive vehicles and all terrain vehicles to access sage grouse leks and at times capture sage grouse. Due to the timing of the capture in April prior to the bulk of the growing season, minimal vegetation impacts are expected. In areas where topography, soils, and or vegetation prevent vehicle access, walking methods will be used.

Cumulative Effects

Several environmental and human factors influence sage grouse populations and their habitat. The Northern Montana source population is annually influenced by factors including regulated hunter harvest, natural predation, West Nile virus, and annual weather fluctuations. Despite these factors, sage grouse populations have remained stable on the source area, largely due to the maintenance of large expanses of sagebrush habitat and the resiliency of sage grouse populations. The impact of removing up to 40 sage grouse is minor in comparison to the above annual factors and has no population level impacts to sage grouse.

Public Comment

MFWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by MFWP and released for public comment on December 14, 2010.

Public comments on the proposed project were taken for more than 30 days, ending January 14, 2011. The EA was provided to 38 separate news media outlets including the Montana Associated Press. These media outlets were located in Montana, North Dakota and Alberta. The EA was also provided to 48 separate entities that included state agencies, agricultural groups, County Commissioners, NGO's, federal agencies and individuals. Lastly, the EA was posted on the FWP webpage: <http://www.fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices>.

Five comments were received on the draft proposal from four individuals and the Bureau of Land Management. Comments were focused on concern of habitat conditions in Alberta, ability of Montana populations to support the Proposed Action and the primary trapping methods that will be utilized. The final EA addresses all comments and provide mitigating actions, when needed.

Decision

Based on the analysis within the EA, public comments and internal review, the Draft EA will be adopted as the Final EA. This Decision Notice and the Final EA will serve as the final documents pertaining to this action.

FWP recognizes that there will be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that an Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

FWP and ASRD have jointly developed this proposal and both desire healthy sage grouse populations that span the 49th parallel. Populations in the trapping area are robust and will not be impacted by the removal of forty animals. This action serves as an example of cooperative action between the province of Alberta, Canada and the State of Montana.

In consideration of these facts, I am pleased recommend to the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission, approve the translocation of forty sage grouse into southeastern Alberta, as described in the preferred alternative.



January 21, 2011

Patrick Gunderson
Region Six Supervisor
